

How it Feels to Survive. by Genevie

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Summary:

Maybe Hopper isn't living, but he is surviving and that's all Hawkins ever asks of him.

Until everything gets turned upside-down.

How it Feels to Survive.

There is a routine Hopper follows once every year. He takes three consecutive days off from work—always the same three days in May—and he rents a car to drive to nowhere in particular. When he's tired, he pulls over and sleeps right in the driver's seat; when he's hungry, he grabs something from a fast food joint and eats it in the parking lot. He breathes in more cigarette smoke than air, doesn't shower or shave. He gargles Listerine when his mouth tastes rank, holding himself back from swallowing any.

He alternates between reminding himself how good it was to know the love of being a father—to have been loved by his daughter—and trying to exorcise all thoughts of Sarah once the pain of missing her begins to lap at the corners of his eyes, burning with the heat of a wildfire.

Once he's back in Hawkins, everyone knows why he was gone but they don't know where he went, what he did, how it felt to tick another morbid anniversary off on his mental calendar, one more year survived as a childless parent. Against the backdrop of their silence, he deconstructs intimacy until all it means is to fuck and he convinces himself that numbness isn't a terrible state of being, just a different one from what he knew before. Even when he's standing in front of a mirror, watching himself down another pill; even when he wakes up with a halo of beer cans and no recollection of the night before; even when everything about himself feels so wrong that he forgets, for a moment, how to keep his knees from buckling beneath him, he thinks that this is all fine. Maybe he isn't living, but he is surviving and that's all Hawkins ever asks of him.



Then, everything gets turned upside-down.

Over the course of a week, Hopper talks more about Sarah to Joyce than he's spoken about her in the entirety of the time since her passing. It's an odd feeling, her name on his lips, the sound of it in his ears. *Sarah*. Two syllables, hissing and low, an unsure breath in and out. Joyce doesn't press him to talk, or look at him with pity written

in the pitch of her shoulders and the set of her face. Sharing these little pieces of his grief with her becomes like dipping his foot into murky waters to test their depth and feeling mud squeeze up between his toes, unpleasant but safe.

He isn't just talking about Sarah more; he's thinking about her more, too. Will's circumstances draw so many parallels to her that they box Hopper in with all of his worst memories. At the back of his mind, he can hear the rattling of her breath and the sounds of too many machines measuring the diminishing strength of her life; he can picture her paleness against the white hospital sheets; he can feel her feverish warmth beneath his fingers.

It could destroy him if he lets it, but he doesn't. Each dragged-up memory renews his determination to save Will, to protect Joyce from learning the full extent of loss, to save himself from having to live both at the centre of tragedy and on its periphery.

Against all odds, they succeed. Hopper puts Sarah back in her box and swallows the key, chasing it with enough alcohol to forget, for a few damned hours, that he walked out of one hell and into another.



This year, as always, Hopper uses some vacation time on the days surrounding Sarah's death. He reserves an inconspicuous black station wagon at the rental place, and he stays up the entire night because he can never sleep before he sets out.

Morning comes and morning goes and Hopper is still at home.

The relief of grasping Will from the brink travels along the same frequency as the grief of feeling Sarah slip through his fingers; it's split open old wounds in new directions and even now the ache is so fresh that Hopper feels like he's walking backwards through time rather than forwards.

It's a strange feeling to not want to distance himself from everything—to not want to be inextricably alone. He doesn't have a damned idea what to do about it anymore. Once, he knew how to reach out to people and how to find comfort in company, but opening himself up

again isn't like getting back on a bike after years of being sedentary. The motions of human interaction aren't kept safe in muscle memory, waiting to be triggered. They hide somewhere deep inside of him, somewhere he's afraid to go. At least isolation is a pain he can control; at least when he's stagnant, he doesn't have to live in dread of loss.

His thoughts travel to Joyce. She's the only person besides his ex-wife who can understand the all-consuming torment of losing a child. Though all the panic and desperation he once saw in her eyes—all the worry, all the bullheaded refusals to believe that her boy might not have a future—is gone now, he knows that this kind of pain is like muscle memory. She'll carry it forever.

He picks up the phone.

Dials her number.

Hangs up when hears her voice because how the hell does he even respond to her *hello*?

Maybe I should just stay here, he thinks, but his double-wide is filthy and depressing and his vices are lain around it like traps, baited with the false promise of relief. If it was any other time of year he'd pick those traps bare but these are Sarah's days, too precious to be reduced to a semi-coherent blur.

He grabs a pack of cigarettes and heads outside, overlooking the lake. The air is moist and cool from the water, and he breathes in a deep, cleansing breath then lights a cigarette and takes a drag, holding the smoke in his mouth before releasing it into the air. It's all very self-indulgent, this mood of his, and he hates that, so he thinks about Sarah instead. Her staccato laugh and the feel of her curled up beside him as he reads her to sleep; the way that she could sense when he'd had a bad day and would devote entire evenings to getting him to smile; her precocious passion for everything that exists beyond the earth. *Sarah's going to be an astronaut one day*, he used to say to everyone who'd listen. *She's gonna see the stars, that girl*.

Now she is the stars and the sun and the moon, too, so distant that he'll never reach her and so persistently bright that even in his lowest

moments, he never knows pitch blackness.

Ten minutes later, he hears the crunching sound of tires on the dirt outside. There's a knock on his door and Joyce's voice is calling out his name. Even though she can't see him, he shrinks a bit against the wall as if to hide. Then he thinks to himself, *what's the worse thing that'll happen if you open that door?*

He meets her outside and is surprised to see her dressed in her work uniform.

"You haven't called and hung up on me since we were kids," she says.

"Yeah, well."

"I thought you'd be gone by now."

It's like he's forgotten how to speak, like words are as foreign a concept to him as camaraderie. All he manages is a dull, "Me too."

"I can stay, if you want some company. You shouldn't feel like you have to be alone, all the time, with this."

"No, no, you have work. I should've known you'd have work."

"I've learned that the world isn't going to end if I miss a few shifts." As if her words aren't already kind enough, she adds, "You're more important than work, Hop."

He thinks about how effortlessly open she is; about how much stronger she is for embracing candor. They laid an almost perfect imitation of her son out on a goddamned morgue slab and she kept moving forwards. People called her crazy and she refused to keep quiet. Everyone left her alone in a corner and she fought with the intensity of a military commander leading an entire battalion. She knows something about surviving that he isn't even close to being able to understand.

But he thinks that maybe he's ready to start understanding it, too.

"Tomorrow," he says. "Come with me to Indianapolis."



He hasn't been to Sarah's grave since he left the city. Even before that, his visits were brief, infrequent. Like phone calls to distant relatives confirming only the most basic details of circumstance. Yes, she's still dead; yes, the pain still buries itself so deep inside of him that it sends shockwaves through every cell of his body; yes, even passing by the graveyard still makes him wonder if he wants a place in a world where Sarah doesn't exist.

The ground above her is entirely covered in grass now. A fresh bouquet of sunflowers leans against her headstone, and he's glad that somebody else has been by today, glad that they're already gone. There are so many things that he wants to say to her but all his words fall quiet on his tongue. It's hard enough just being here, standing only six feet away but an eternity apart. Joyce presses her hand against the small of his back, her fingers moving in gentle circles.

Memories of Sarah rise from the grave, beautiful little ghosts wrapping him up in their arms, whispering warmth and fondness and love into his ears. He sees her face in the flowers, feels her touch in the wind, hears her laughter in the pulse of his own heart. It hurts him to be here, of course it does, but it's a new kind of hurt. Where once he knew only the shock of a full-body break, now he feels the throb that takes over as the healing process begins.

When he turns away, Joyce pulls him into as full of a hug as she can manage, and he looks up at the sky and thinks that maybe this is how it feels to survive.